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Voerman, Gerrit

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### *Document Version*

Final author's version (accepted by publisher, after peer review)

### *Publication date:*

1989

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Voerman, G. (1989). *The CPN between adaptation and separation Dutch communism and the international communist movement 1945-1970: Paper presented for the seminar of the Research Group on Western-European Communism, Paris, September 28-30 1989*. Paper gepresenteerd op Seminar of the Research Group on Western-European Communism, Paris, France.

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THE CPN BETWEEN ADAPTATION AND SEPARATION  
Dutch communism and the  
international communist movement  
1945-1970

by Gerrit Voerman

Research Associate  
Documentation Centre on Dutch Political Parties  
University of Groningen (The Netherlands)

Paper presented for the seminar of the Research Group on  
Western-European Communism

Paris, September 28-30 1989

DOCUMENTATIECENTRUM  
NEDERLANDSE POLITIEKE  
PARTIJEN

In this paper, the relation between the CPN (Communistische Partij Nederland) and the Soviet Union in the period from 1945 to 1970 will be examined. In particular, attention will be paid to the Dutch communists' attitude towards Moscow in the period of destalinization at the end of the fifties and in the time of the Sino-Soviet conflict at the beginning of the sixties. As will be shown, the CPN kept in pace with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, when the communist world movement was still rather monolithic. In 'Times of Troubles', on the other hand, when the international cohesion came under pressure, the CPN tended to opt for its own interests. This did not automatically imply a break with Moscow, however: for the authority of the leadership of the CPN within the party was for a large part dependent on the relations with the socialist homeland. Nevertheless, in the mid-sixties the CPN committed parricide and cut through the ties with the Soviet Union: the party chose candidly for what was considered its own interest.

## life-line

For the CPN, like so many other communist parties, the relationship with the Soviet Union was of vital importance. In fact, it could be considered the life-line for Dutch communism. The CPN was nourished by Moscow - ideologically, morally and to a certain extent materially. However, sometimes it was nearly strangled by it. To a large extent the developments in electorate and membership of the CPN reflect the measure of prestige the Soviet Union enjoyed in (parts of) Dutch society. At least at three times in its existence, the CPN benefited from its orientation on Moscow: in 1918, in the wake of the Russian revolution; in the 1930s, when in the Soviet Union the system of economic planning seemed to offer a real alternative to the capitalist economy in crisis; and finally after 1945, when the CPN benefited from the contribution Stalin had made to the defeat of the Nazis. However, every boom was followed by a downfall in which the Soviet Union also had its share. At the end of the 1930s, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact caused an exodus, and because of the loyalty of the CPN to Moscow during the Cold War, the party shrivelled down to a hard core in the 1950s.

## stalinization of the CPN

In the early 1920s, after the joining of the Comintern, an end had come to the formally democratic party structure the CPN and its forerunner the SDP (Socialistische Partij) had known since 1909. The compulsory '21 conditions' for acceptance into the Third International were incorporated in the statutes of the CPN in 1924. In this, autonomy was given up and the authority of the Comintern-executive accepted. From now on, centralism and discipline set the tune. The authority of Moscow was confirmed by the outcome of the inner party strife after 1925. At the end of the decade, the rules of the CPN were brought into agreement with the CPN-archive was closed during the summer.

1. Unfortunately, notes of the meetings of the party executive in the period involved could not be consulted, because the CPN-archive was closed during the summer.

the latest Comintern-directives. As a result, the bolshevization of the CPN was completed: the party was transformed into a disciplined organization according to the Leninist principle of democratic centralism, led by faithful followers of Moscow.<sup>2</sup>

The bolshevization of the CPN had been made easier by the increasing fixation on Moscow. Both factors together prepared the way for the stalinization of the CPN around 1930. Harmsen and Koper have set out in detail the distinguishing features of the Dutch variant of stalinism. They mention among other things the out-and-out justification of Soviet policy, the glorification of Stalin and the unconditional loyalty to Moscow; the application of democratic centralism to the party; the rise of Paul de Groot as unchallenged party leader; the dogmatic interpretation of marxism-leninism according to the exegesis given by Moscow; the denunciation of party members who deviated from the official line; the disposition to workarism combined with anti-intellectualism; and the implacable attitude towards social democracy.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1930s, these processes of organizational centralization - the transformation of the CPN into a hierarchical, disciplined party - and of 'russification' - the political, ideological or even psychological fixation on Moscow - went hand in hand. Both processes reinforced each other, while the latter facilitated the former. The lasting organizational restraints which party members had set themselves to voluntarily seemed to have been possible only because of their identification with the Soviet Union and its leader, Stalin. This attachment enabled the leadership of the CPN - as an intermediary between Moscow and its own rank and file - to reign autocratically, reflecting something of the power and prestige of Stalin.

## Cold War

After the liberation, the CPN returned as the Dutch political satellite of the Soviet Union. In the beginning, the CPN tried to broaden its foothold. De Groot pleaded a merger with social democracy and other progressive forces. This strategy aroused strong criticism and was consequently given up. Thereafter the CPN wrapped itself in its old organizational shape and made a splendid comeback: in the first post-war elections the party received about 10% of the vote. The communists were rewarded not only for the prominent part they had played in the Dutch resistance against the Nazis, but also benefited from the contribution the Soviet Union had made to the defeat of Hitler. The outbreak of the Cold War, however, showed that the gains of the CPN were only temporary. After the communist take over in Prague in February 1948 the party lost within two years half of

2. For more details on the organizational changes in the CPN in the 1920s see G. Voerman, 'Now away, with all your superstitions': the delimitation of the CPN and its causes. Paper presented at the workshop on 'The Organization of the Western European Communist Parties' at the European Consortium for Political Research, Paris, 10-15 April 1989; 18-20.  
3. G. Harmsen, 'Stalinisme en Koude Oorlog', in: id., *Nederlands kommunisme: gebundelde opstellen*. Nijmegen, 1982, 17; A. Koper, *Onder de banier van het stalinisme: een onderzoek naar de geblokkeerde destalinisatie van de CPN*. Amsterdam, 1984, 109-110.

its treasured 'war-profit'. Its obstinate defence of Soviet foreign policy and the spreading anti-communism forced the party into political and social isolation.

During the early fifties, the CPN completely identified itself with the Soviet Union. In international affairs, the position of the Cominform was taken over - though the CPN did not join this organization - and the so-called 'theory of the two camps' adopted. In the constitution of the CPN, the capitalist camp, led by the United States, was accused of preparing a third World War. Only because of the efforts of the socialist camp, headed by Moscow - by nature peaceful - this could be avoided. "In this battle for peace" the CPN took part "in indissoluble solidarity with the Soviet Union".<sup>4</sup> If necessary, the CPN was prepared to wage war at the side of Moscow, as De Groot had made clear in 1949 in imitation of Thorez and Togliatti.<sup>5</sup>

Not only because of its international role, but also because of its societal system the Soviet Union was a radiant example. The CPN reassured its adherents that the victory of socialism in the Soviet Union was attended "with the birth of a new type of human being... namely socialist man, who in the first place considers the welfare of the community a precondition to his personal welfare".<sup>6</sup> All these successes were attributed to Stalin, who was praised in the constitution of the CPN as "the greatest reformer of society, teacher and statesman, who ever has headed progressive humanity".<sup>7</sup>

In the fifties, the evaluation of Stalin and the foreign policy of Moscow did not change. The appreciation of the internal situation in the Soviet Union, however, became more realistic after the death of Stalin in 1953. This process was started by the unmasking of the 'doctors' plot'. Instead of enlarging on mostly fictitious victories now difficulties that the socialist construction had to face, received more emphasis in the party press.

The careful distancing of the Soviet Union concerning its internal matters had no consequences on the regime inside the CPN. On the eve of the Cold War, centralization increased and discipline was further tightened.<sup>8</sup> The party was stalinized to the bone: dissidents were expelled and the adulation of De Groot took on grotesque forms. The pre-war history was rewritten in a more favourable light for the party secretary. All this was accepted by the rank and file, who had great faith in their leaders. Former communist Harmsen recollects from the Cold War clearly a mood of: "politics is a matter for the top; the leadership invents it, because they are more competent and have more information from Moscow than the common members: thereby they see things better, but can not say everything".<sup>9</sup>

4. De weg naar socialistisch Nederland (The way to the socialist Netherlands). Amsterdam, 1952, 10.
5. A.A. de Jonge. Het communisme in Nederland: de geschiedenis van een politieke partij. Den Haag, 1972, 98.
6. Ibid., 19.
7. Ibid., 24.
8. See Voerman, 'Now Away', 20-21.
9. Harmsen, 'Stalinisme', 43.

The destalinization which was started by the secret speech of Khrushchev at the 20th congress of the CPSU in February 1956, placed the CPN leadership in a dilemma. Apparently the possible consequences of the speech for its position were recognized: both the following of Khrushchev and the dissociation from its Soviet mentors could weaken its authority within the party. At any case, the traditional link between russification and centralization was threatened. The executive tried to limit the consequences of the destalinization by executing both options only half-way. Consequently, for the first time in some 25 years the CPN distanced itself openly - though only for a short time - from Moscow. On the other hand, a half-fledged organizational renewal was suggested, which actually never was realized.

### 'non-interference'

In April, after a period of confusion, the party executive published a resolution, in which it announced that Stalin had made some mistakes.<sup>10</sup> Most important was his violation of the Leninist principles of party democracy because of the personality cult. Nevertheless, the CPN was still very favourable about Stalin. At the utmost, his mistakes could be qualified as mismanagement, but they certainly did not stem from the socialist system. It was concluded that despite some mistakes, the CPSU always had pursued the right Leninist policy. In the resolution the CPN regretted, however, that it had defended the personality cult to the Dutch public. The party stated that it would never defend events in other countries "if these escaped from its judgement". Besides, a critical judgement was proposed of theories about arts and science "without resigning itself in advance to the position which is taken up by the Soviet Union on this point."<sup>11</sup>

This position of non-interference in matters of other parties precluded to the concept of autonomy to which the CPN was converted to in the sixties. It had nothing to do, however, with Togliatti's concept of polycentrism, which was strongly criticized by the CPN: the leading role of the Soviet Union in general was not at stake. Nor was a 'Dutchification' of the CPN intended. Articles in the parties' theoretical magazine in which the CPN was called on to reevaluate the famous 'Dutch school' in early 20th century Marxism (Pannekoek, Gorter, Roland Holst), were not appreciated. In fact, the introduction of the idea of non-interference was only dictated by repugnance to Khrushchev's 'démarsque of Stalin' and had to disguise the decision of the CPN to pursue its own interests instead of supporting blindly Soviet interests. It furnished the party with an alibi for not having to deal with the problem of destalinization. In this way, De Groot hoped to stifle the discussion in the CPN. Destalinization was considered as an internal problem of the Soviet Union and the CPSU, with which the

10. 'Resolutie over het twintigste congres van de CPSU', in: *Politiek en Cultuur*, 1956, 309-311.  
11. *Ibid.*, 311.

CPN had nothing to do.<sup>12</sup> That the CPN paid only lip-service to the destalinization, was proved in the summer of 1956. During the national elections which were held at that time, the communists had found the consequences of the new wind from Moscow to their cost: their electorate was halved. Now De Groot did not mince matters and publicly called Khrushchev 'Knoei' ('bungler'). He blamed the general secretary of the CPSU for putting too much stress on the negative sides of Stalin and fiercely criticized him for washing the dirty linen of the Soviet Union in public.<sup>13</sup>

### in line again

Because of the electoral defeat, the 18th party congress was advanced. In the working paper, the executive endorsed with delight the resolution on the personality cult the CPSU had issued in the summer of 1956 after the events in Poland and in which the faults of Stalin were limited to his last years.<sup>14</sup> The CPN-draft showed understanding for Stalin's difficult position and pointed to the particular circumstances - notably the hostile encirclement - which had led to the personality cult. A repetition now was considered out of the question, because of the completely changed situation.

The 18th party congress, which was held in October 1956, accepted this standpoint and qualified the resolution of the CPSU as "a right and satisfying analysis of the causes and consequences of the personality cult."<sup>15</sup> The CPN was again in line with the Soviet Union, though the congress stated the principle of non-interference in internal matters of communist parties. Not only the CPN congress did not want to join the anti-stalinist choir of critics, it also was not willing to transpose the destalinization on its own party. In its working paper the executive had stated that certain party members had tried "to apply to our party the criticism which was directed in the Soviet Union at Stalin. They stated that in our party also democracy was violated and that a personality cult would exist... This is contrary to the truth".<sup>16</sup> Without any opposition worth mentioning, the congress subscribed to this judgement and agreed with De Groot, who at the congress declared the discussion about Stalin as closed.

Unexpectedly, the ideological orthodoxy of the 18th congress was combined with a proposal for organizational renovation. Though the stalinization of the CPN was denied, a reorganization of the party was suggested which could be interpreted as destalinization;

12. In 1961, De Groot openly stated this. The mistakes Stalin had made "belong to the internal matters of the Soviet party..."; and about internal matters "every party has to decide autonomously". Cited in M. Müller, Die Auseinandersetzungen der CPN zwischen 1956 und 1968. Mannheim, 1978, 40.
13. Müller, Auseinandersetzungen, 22.
14. 'Discussiegrondslag voor het 18de Congres van de CPN', in: 'Politiek en Cultuur', 1956, 616-622.
15. 'Resoluties van het 18de congres der CPN', in: 'Politiek en Cultuur', 1956, 687.
16. Ibid., 619.

17. De Jonge, Communisme, 115; Koper, Onder de banier, 156.  
18. De Jonge, Communisme, 115.

At first sight, in 1956 De Groot had succeeded in keeping the CPN and its leadership out of range of the destalinization. At the party congress, the discussion was stifled in its birth. Within the party leadership, however, there was growing resistance against De Groot. In the course of 1957, the all-powerful position of the party secretary, discord about the relation between the CPN and the communist trade union EVC (Eenheden Vak Centrale) and some adjustments in the functioning of the executive, led to opposition, which took the shape of a generation conflict.<sup>17</sup> Eventually these problems, closely related to the problem of destalinization, caused a split in the party.

The conflict started about the question how far the authority of the CPN over the EVC reached. The CPN was willing to abolish the EVC because it would withhold the social democratic masses from joining the CPN. The leadership of the EVC saw their position threatened by this and came in conflict with De Groot. They were supported by members of the parliamentary group, who held the opinion that De Groot was too much a solist.

This opposition against De Groot consisted mainly of party leaders, who had won their spurs in the resistance during the Second World War. Most of them were only thirty at the time of the liberation. Unexperienced in normal political work, they followed De Groot in the beginning, getting more engrained, however, in the mid-fifties some of them started to rebel against the omnipotent general secretary and demanded more freedom of discussion.

According to De Jonge, in the early fifties De Groot deliberately started to introduce a younger generation in the party leadership.<sup>18</sup> These 'apparatsjiki' came to the fore as a result of one of the organizational adjustments the 18th Congress had decided upon: the prohibition for members of the daily executive to have two or more functions. The old guard, who combined parliamentary or trade union work with the activities in the daily executive, suffered mostly by this and saw themselves replaced by the youngsters. De Groot, on the contrary, benefited much from these changes and increased his power.

#### Split within the party

the more, because the main reason for the CPN not functioning smoothly, was that too much was copied from the model of the CPSU (and also the PCI and PCF).

In the Soviet Union, France and Italy, the communist parties played as mass organizations a totally different role than the small CPN in the Netherlands. It was argued, because of the un-careful imitation, "excessive centralization" and "bureaucratic procedures" had come in existence. A dozen changes were suggested, aimed at a certain decentralization and stimulation of the self-activity of local branches. Most of the proposals perished in the aftermath of the anti-communist fury in November 1956, which were provoked by the embracement by the CPN of the Soviet intervention in Hungary.



At the beginning of 1958, the slumbering conflicts came to a head. Because of the interference of the CPN in the EVC, two oppositionalists gave up their positions in the CPN-executive. The conflict led to a split in the ranks of the communist trade union: an independent EVC and a party-loyal EVC<sup>58</sup> were formed. Under the cloak of 'violation of party discipline' the opposition, including four out of seven communist members of the Second Chamber, was expelled.<sup>19</sup> After some time, the oppositionists founded their own party, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). The SWP remained loyal to marxism-leninism, democratic centralism and solidarity with the Soviet Union, but was more in line with the Polish, Italian and Yugoslav communists, who saw in 'dogmatism and sectarianism' the main threat for communism, and not, like the CPSU and the CPN, in 'right opportunism and revisionism'.

In the intra-party conflict, De Groot skillfully made use of the campaign against revisionism within the international communist movement. He blamed the 'revisionist' opposition for "their unprincipled attacks on party leaders... waiting over 'lack of freedom of discussion' and their demand of 'democratization' - this means the right for the rightist tendency to poison the party".<sup>20</sup> In his fight against the revisionists, De Groot again came closer to Moscow, which in its turn warmly welcomed the expulsion of the opposition as a "crushing blow which was delivered to the revisionists in the ranks of the CPN".<sup>21</sup>

### Sino-Soviet dispute

Around 1960, the CPN seemed firmly in line with Moscow again. For instance, the renewed program of the CPSU was propagated in the Netherlands and the space flight of Gagarin was celebrated as a real socialist victory. Under the surface, however, tensions were growing, this time because of the emerging conflict between the Soviet Union and China. After the CPN had learned about the dispute, the executive at first played the ostrich, just like it had done in 1956 in the first instance. It was decided not to inform the rank and file about the problem in order to avoid discussions which might divide the party.

In the meantime, behind the scenes the CPN cautiously distanced itself somewhat from the Soviet standpoint. This was shown

19. In the report De CPN in de oorlog ('The CPN during the war'), the activities in the resistance of some of the leaders of the opposition were distorted in accordance with the stalinist tradition. The rapport was accepted by the 19th Congress of the CPN in December 1958. Only 25 years later, at the 28th Congress in 1982, it was withdrawn.

20. Koper, Onder de banier, 231.

21. 'Boodschap van de CPSU aan het 19de congres van de CPN', in: Politiek en Cultuur, 1959, 140.

at the World Conference in Moscow, November 1960, where the condemnation by the Albanian leader Hoxha of the interference of the CPSU in the internal matters of the smaller communist parties was supported by the Dutch delegation.

Eventually the strategy of ignoring the deepening conflict between the two communist superpowers was untenable. In 1963, after the breakdown of the negotiations between Moscow and Peking, De Groot suddenly proclaimed the autonomy of the CPN within the international communist movement, which implied concentration of the party on its national tasks.

This proclamation reflected the increased self-confidence of the Dutch communists at that time. Detente had brought them their first victory in the national elections since 1946. The CPN was salomfähig again: all restrictive measures stemming from the Cold War were removed. Apparently the party wanted to benefit from these favourable circumstances and not to let it be spoiled by international communist problems. Thereby, De Groot could now do without Soviet sanctioning of his authority. His power in the CPN was unquestioned; the oppositional GWP no longer played any part.

In his speech, De Groot openly admitted that the interests of the CPN differed from the *raison d'état* of the Soviet Union. The essence of the 'theory of the two camps', the dogma of the identity of interests of communist parties - whether governing or not - was abandoned. Referring to the ideological disputes between Khrushchev and Mao, De Groot stated that the conflict was in essence "about economic issues, about the balance of power within the socialist camp and within the international communist movement".<sup>22</sup> From now on, the CPN should only be "responsible to the working population of the Netherlands... Our internal activities are number one. Our international activities are only useful if they are made subservient to our primary tasks".<sup>23</sup>

Now De Groot publicly advocated that the CPN should be guided by its *raison de parti*, he did not mince matters about the destabilization. "Concerning the judgement of Stalin", the party secretary said, "our party was so clever not to get influenced by imperialists, revisionists and hysterical self-castigators in the Soviet Union". Though De Groot recognized the necessity of the liquidation of the personality cult, he would not accept organizational consequences for the CPN. On the contrary, De Groot spoke highly of the way the CPN had avoided that criticism of Stalin had led "to nihilism within our ranks, to anti-leadership views, to anarchy within the organization and its leadership which make the party unmanageable".<sup>24</sup>

The 21th congress of the CPN in 1964 confirmed the autonomous position of the party. The congress demanded "full respect for the .. political line and .. the leadership from the side of the other communist parties. Every form of violation in this matter, or interference or keeping in tutelage... has to be avoided". The link between centralization and russification, which was

22. De Jonge, *Communisme*, 145-146.

23. Ibid., 146.

24. 'Over de geschillen in de communistische wereldbeweging: rede van P. de Groot op de zitting van het partijbestuur der CPN op 18 juli 1963', in: *Politiek en Cultuur*, 1963, 387-388.

broken implicitly by the proclamation of autonomy, was publicly cut through by De Groot, notably by appealing to destalinization. Since the negative sides of the Soviet Union were known, it was clear that "not everything what is said or done in the Soviet Union, could serve as an example to us".<sup>25</sup> According to De Groot, the long-established relations with Moscow had resulted in a "Russification of the image of our party", which had kept the CPN in an isolated position.

After its 'Declaration of Independence', the CPN at first did not take sides in the conflict between Peking and Moscow and covertly criticized both Moscow and Peking. After the expulsion of Khrushchev in October 1964, neutrality was over and the Soviets were blamed for starting the conflict with China. In the eyes of De Groot, the rightist policies of Khrushchev had played into the hand of the Chinese dogmatists; "the ultra-leftist deviation is often a punishment for rightist sins".<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the CPN did not turn to a pro-Chinese standpoint; the emerging maoist tendency within the party was expelled overnight.<sup>27</sup>

Relations with the Soviet Union soon worsened now. International communist meetings were only attended by a low profile delegation, or not visited at all. Consequently, travelling of party functionaries to Eastern Europe was forbidden, just like visits to socialist embassies in The Hague. In 1966, the correspondent of the party paper was withdrawn from Moscow and one year later the CPN did not celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. In 1968, the armed intervention of the Pact of Warsaw in Czechoslovakia was condemned heavily. The anti-Moscow attitude of the CPN in the second part of the sixties gradually developed into a state of xenophobia. Everything bearing only a slight likeness to the international communist movement and the Soviet Union was put under taboo. This mentality even took paranoiac forms: in 1967 it was announced that Moscow, together with certain helpers from the GDR and Czechoslovakia tried to meddle with the CPN. However, at the high point of this campaign things changed. Around 1970, the CPN made some overtures to Moscow. Thereupon the party gradually drew out of its horns.

#### concluding remarks

In the period 1956-1963, the national and international positions of the CPN changed completely. During the Cold War, the CPN was a full member within the communist world movement. Because of that, the party was heavily charged: within Dutch politics and society, the CPN was an outcast whose power shrank with every election. In the sixties, the CPN became integrated in the Netherlands and strengthened its electoral position substantially. Again a high price had to be paid: to be a paria in the international communist movement.

The complete change-over was probably only possible because

25. Muller, Aussenbeziehungen, 45-46.
26. De Jonge, Communisme, 151.
27. About Dutch maoism see G. Voerman, 'De "Rode Jehova's"', Een geschiedenis van de Socialistische Partij', in: Jaarboek 1986 Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen, Groningen, 1987, 124-150.

of the stalinist way the party was run. The centralization within the CPN was facilitated because the party was highly russified. From the beginning of the 1930s till the mid-fifties, the interests of the CPN were identified with those of the Soviet Union and the party followed Moscow unquestioningly. This identity of interests, even if it was at its own expense, was accepted by the CPN, partly because it determined its raison d'être; partly also because it legitimized the authority of the CPN leadership. In 1956, the secret speech of Khrushchev caused the first cracks in this identity of Soviet and CPN interests. Out of fear that the destalinization might weaken their authority, the leadership decided to distance itself a bit from Moscow. This limited 'derussification' was stopped promptly when the Soviet Union retraced its steps. Supported by Moscow, De Groot succeeded in laying to rest the oppositional ghost within the CPN and strengthened thus its own position.

In the first years of the 1960s, unity in the international communist movement was put at the test again. Elaborating on the concept of 'non-interference' the CPN declared itself autonomous: instead of the interest of the Soviet Union, the CPN wanted to seek its own interests. Self-confident and aware of his power, De Groot cut through the relations with world communism: stalinist autocracy had outlived russification in the CPN.